



Executive Summary

Special Education Advocate Training to Address Anti-Black Racism in Special Education

An Easterseals Partnership with the Collaborative on Racialized Disability (CORD)

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Black students encounter wide inequities in services provided within specialized education programs. Black youth with disabilities are disproportionately represented in special education and more likely to experience exclusionary disciplinary actions from schools. Anti-Black racism and *ableism*—a system that assigns value on people’s bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideals of normalcy and intelligence—exacerbate the challenges Black families face when navigating and accessing high quality special education services. Yet typical trainings for special education advocates tend not to directly address the uniqueness and complexity of Black families’ experiences. This summary describes outcomes from the initial phase of a special education advocate training, developed through a partnership between Easterseals and researchers in the Collaborative on Racialized Disability (CORD), to address the pressing need to better serve Black youth with disabilities and their families.

Training & Curriculum

The purpose of the CORD Special Education Advocate training is to expand traditional notions of special education advocacy. We seek to foster ideals that move beyond individualistic and scarcity mindsets that are founded on white norms, instead pushing toward collective liberation, intersectional consciousness, and trust in partnerships with schools and school systems that all too often marginalize Black youth with disabilities and their families. Thus, this training supports both the interrogation of anti-Black racism in special education and the development of skills and strategies to disrupt anti-Blackness by exploring pathways to center and learn from families of Black youth with disabilities.

Three modules comprise this training. Module 1 focuses on building community. It consists of a review of traditional special education policies and practices (e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)) and how these apply to the experiences of Black youth receiving special education services. The first module also introduces participants to concepts such as intersectionality and ableism that they would encounter during the remainder of the training. Module 2 addresses anti-Blackness in education and special education. This includes explicitly defining anti-Blackness, recognizing the various ways anti-Blackness manifests itself, and specific strategies to address anti-Blackness in school contexts. Participants also learn about motivational interviewing and its potential for supporting Black families in ways that enhance their agency. Module 3 focuses on how special education advocates could expand traditional notions of advocacy through centering, embracing, and supporting understandings and values Black families.

Recruitment & Participants

In Summer 2021, CORD piloted these recently developed training modules with veteran Special Education advocates. A multifaceted approach to recruitment was utilized to reach

multiple sites, agencies, and individuals already engaged in special education advocacy that service families of Black youth. This included emails and phone calls to state Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs), state and local Advocacy and Protection Agencies, professional and advocacy-centered organizations, and university teacher preparation programs. Easterseals central and affiliate offices made substantial contributions to this effort by reaching out to their vast network of advocates committed to educational equity. While recruitment garnered broad interest, this phase of the project required participants to have prior experience serving families of Black youth with disabilities. The result was that a set of over 60 action-oriented, experienced special education advocates completed the training. It is noteworthy that this group was both racially and geographically diverse: fifty-seven percent of the participants from across 14 different states were non-white (40% Black, 8% Latinx, 5% Asian, 2% American Indian, and 3% other). Overall, this administration of the training engaged participants whose substantial presence, knowledge, and contributions in supporting Black youth with disabilities could be leveraged to help CORD improve future iterations of the modules. To that end, CORD developed and collected a pre- and post-survey from each participant and Accenture conducted focus groups to elicit feedback and further understand their experiences with the modules.

Key Areas of Participant Growth

The participants concurred that racial inequities exist in special education advocacy. Upon completion of the training, they also acknowledged the contributions of Easterseals and CORD, stating that the curriculum is a significant start to addressing existing disparities in the field. Participants described three interconnected areas of growth promoted by their engagement with the modules: 1) Confidence in capabilities, 2) Actions and strategies, 3) Anti-racist self-reflection.

Confidence in capabilities to navigate challenging situations

Sixty-eight percent of BIPOC respondents reported addressing anti-Black racism directly in their advocacy work prior to taking the modules, significantly greater than the 50% reported by their white counterparts. Twenty-five percent of all focus group participants shared that they previously did nothing to address the Black experience in their work. These numbers highlight the need for greater advocate competency in identifying and confronting anti-Black racism in special education processes and practices. After completion of the training, there was a 43% increase in the number of respondents who reported feeling extremely or very confident in their ability to effectively serve as a special education advocate for Black families.

Actions and strategies for addressing anti-Black racism

Survey respondents described specific actions they might take to address anti-Black racism. These ranged from adjustments to special education-specific processes specifically to anti-racist advocacy work generally. For example, one respondent shared that the training “helped me to call out racism more directly.” Another stated that the course “positions Black families as knowledge generators.”

Ninety-two percent of respondents felt strongly that the training begins to address the gap in support for Black families and their youth with disabilities. They stated that the modules provided them with the necessary tools to help them negotiate meaningful day-to-day interactions, unlike other trainings they had taken previously that were heavily theoretical. Participants felt supported with the right terminology and understandings of anti-Blackness, intersectionality, community cultural wealth, and motivational interviewing-strategies that could

enable them to build more meaningful relationships with Black families going forward. As one focus group participant stated, the training offered tools for “disrupting the system of white supremacy and de-centering whiteness as the ideal.”

Anti-racist self-reflection

Participants noted the various ways they personally grappled with the reality of racism and reflected on their own roles in perpetuating racism through engaging their intersectional consciousness. This process enabled them to consider how systemic dynamics are entangled within markers of sociocultural identities of privilege and differences. As noted in one focus group participant’s response when asked about specific changes after the training, “Taking an extra second to think about the biases and assumptions I am making as a white advocate and stop to consider how my advocacy has an impact on their [Black families] experience.”

Future Directions

While the data collected were self-reported, participants offered invaluable insights to shaping future iterations of the training. In the focus groups, when asked what components were missing that would have enhanced the training experience or support, 38% indicated opportunities for peer collaboration and 26% specified their desire to access live instruction and interaction. Future iterations on this project will work to provide more opportunities for connections among the participants.

Authors:

Dr. Mildred Boveda, Associate Professor, Special Education, Pennsylvania State University

Dr. Maleka Donaldson, Assistant Professor, Education and Child Study, Smith College

Dr. Aubry Threlkeld, Dean of Education, School of Education, Endicott College

Dr. Courtney Wilt, Assistant Professor, Special Education, University of Wisconsin, Whitewater

Dr. Sylvia Nyegenye, Special Education, University of Kansas